

‘Josh could do better’: Bringing out the best in Underachieving Gifted and Talented Students

Abstract

“Underachievement among the gifted and talented is a significant issue because of the loss to society of unrealised potential” (Moltzen, 2004, p. 371). This article will discuss the concept of underachievement among gifted and talented students and discuss the issues that surround the concept. It will identify the behaviours related to underachieving gifted and talented students and will outline identification practices and strategies for meeting these students’ needs. This article identifies three aspects that play a part in reversing underachievement: teachers, families and the students themselves.

Introduction

The gifted and talented students of a population are the students who should grow up to be our forerunning politicians, businessmen, scientists and artists to name a few. If we are not recognising and developing the potentials of these students in schools, are we letting down the future generations? One of the National Administration Guidelines that all schools have to adhere to is: “on the basis of good quality assessment information, identify students and groups of students who ... have special needs, including gifted and talented students” (Ministry of Education, 2009). It is easy to identify the students who outwardly display their giftedness and talents but what about the students who are gifted and talented but are not getting good grades or are not engaged in school? How do we identify these students and what can we do to get them engaged in school and achieving to their potentials?

We often hear teachers saying “Sally could do better if she only put in the effort” or “Josh has great potential.” What is it that stops these children from reaching their potential? How can we know what their potential is? As Montgomery (2009) notes, teachers may instinctively ‘know’ that a child may be gifted or talented and is underachieving, but how do we go about formally identifying this and encouraging the student in developing their gifts and talents? While it is important that all students are given opportunities to achieve to their potential, underachievement among gifted and talented students is a significant issue because of the loss to society of unrealised potential if these students are not identified and catered for (Moltzen, 2004). This article will address these questions by outlining the concept of underachievement, discussing how it can be identified and possible reasons for underachievement and providing models and strategies that can be employed to reverse the problem of underachievement among gifted and talented students.

Defining Underachievement

At the simplest level underachievement among gifted and talented students is unfulfilled potential, but it is difficult to know what a student’s true potential is (Moltzen, 2004). Rimm (2003, p. 425) defines underachievement among gifted students as occurring

when “children’s habits, efforts, and skills cause them to lose their sense of control over school outcomes.” She goes on to describe that these students are less likely to be identified as gifted because their intelligence or creativity may no longer be evident in the classroom. Rimm (2008) describes how underachievers usually start out as able preschoolers, but at some point they lose their enthusiasm for learning and the cycle of underachievement begins.

Among the majority of the population of gifted and talented underachievers, Clark (2008) notes that there are two types of underachievers, situational underachievers and chronic underachievers. Situational underachievers are those who do not achieve to their potential in certain situations or on certain occasions, such as when a clash occurs with a teacher or they have problems at home. Chronic underachievers are those who present a pattern that occurs regularly and is particularly difficult to resolve. Underachievers may have shown some glimmer of giftedness and talent, but show performance on school-related tasks that is lower than average for their age (Clark). Montgomery (2009) notes that underachievement may occur in the preschool period, in school or in later life, therefore giftedness and talent may never have been evident in the classroom.

However, Heacox (1991) notes that most commonly the underachievement cycle begins to occur in middle school (Years 7-10) as up until then school may have been ‘easy’ and these students did not need to develop the skills associated with learning. Then suddenly the curriculum catches up with the student’s knowledge and skill level and the material being presented is unfamiliar. Clark (2008) and Reis (2007) note that patterns of underachievement differ between females and males, Clark indicates that male underachievers often begin getting lower grades in their first year at school, with underachievement becoming significant in their third year and becoming more apparent in each following year as they encounter challenges that require effort. Whereas female underachievers grades commonly begin to decline in their sixth year at school. As Montgomery (2009) and Reis (2007) note it is difficult to measure the exact magnitude of this problem because these students usually go unidentified, that is the main part of the problem. As teachers, underachieving gifted and talented students can present the most

frustration they may experience in their career, these children who have the potential for high achievement but are not using their talent in productive ways often become bored with school and begin misbehaving (Reis, 2007).

In the past underachievement may have been dismissed as being due to a lack of motivation or laziness, or pupils might have been considered beyond help because of their disadvantaged backgrounds or lack of cultural context, but now we know better. We know that good schools and expert teachers can and do make a difference (Montgomery, 2009). Davis and Rimm (2004) note that underachievement is not a crisis of certain groups; it spans all socio-economic and cultural groups. They also describe that if the underachieving pattern can be reversed the extent of positive change after appropriate re-engagement can be quite surprising.

Identifying Underachievement

The first step in reversing underachievement among gifted and talented students is recognising that there is a problem (Davis & Rimm, 2004). Gifted and talented students who are underachieving are a diverse group. Clark (2008) notes that just as giftedness and talent is present in all socio-economic and cultural groups, so is underachievement. In order to identify underachieving gifted and talented students, teachers need to look beyond test scores and learn to identify the common characteristics these students share. Ideally to identify an underachieving gifted and talented student, a person should have some experience in measurement, be aware of various learning and motivational styles and problems, be knowledgeable about behavioural learning theory, and be sensitive to the special characteristics of gifted and talented students (Davis & Rimm, 2004).

Baum, Renzulli and Hebert (1995) carried out research into the underachievement of gifted and talented students and found that identifying these students was problematic. They found that the definition has to be broad and can be interpreted differently in different contexts. However, they provide a starting point for investigation into whether a student may be gifted and talented but underachieving. Evidence of high potential can

include: eligibility for a gifted programme; teacher observation of high ability in certain areas, at certain times or under certain circumstances; a previous record of high achievement; or sample products showing expertise or in-depth interest in a certain area.

Table 1. Common Characteristics of Underachieving Gifted and Talented Students

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large gap between oral and written work • Poor literacy skills • Poor or exceptionally high test performance • Superior comprehension and retention of concepts when interested • Failure to complete schoolwork and homework • Low self-esteem, believes they can not achieve highly • Poor execution of work • Refuses to do work • May be imaginative and creative but not like to share ideas • Dissatisfaction with own achievements • Avoidance of trying new activities • Resists teacher's efforts to motivate in class • Perfectionism and extreme self-criticism • Sets unrealistic goals and aspirations, too low or too high • Does not work well in groups or subverts group work • Lacks concentration • Poor attitude to school • May have difficulties with peers; does not have many friends • Performs satisfactorily in all most areas at a level with peers • Easily distracted, unable to focus attention

(Adapted from Baum et al, 1995; Davis & Rimm, 2004 and Montgomery, 2009)

Underachieving students will not of course display all of these characteristics but Davis and Rimm (2004) note that the most frequent characteristic found among underachieving gifted and talented students is a low self-esteem. These students do not believe they are capable of achieving what their teachers expect of them.

Heacox (1991) developed nine profiles which cover the spectrum that covers the usual combinations of characteristics that underachieving gifted and talented students display. These profiles were not intended to label students, rather to enhance teachers understanding of how particular combinations of characteristics lead to the display of distinct behaviours in the classroom and are very useful as a first step to begin to identify underachieving gifted and talented students. See Appendix One for an overview of the profiles.

Clark (2008) explains that underachievement is often hard to detect especially among chronic underachievers who are in a cycle of achieving below their potential because, as Davis and Rimm (2004) point out, years of being involved in learning experiences far below the student's ability level may make current test scores insufficient to become aware of underachievement. In this case where underachievement is suspected Clark suggests looking at a student's results and behaviour over time and trying to establish where the pattern of underachievement began and the reasons for it. This however is an ideal that can be difficult to obtain, especially with highly transient children who have been to many schools and whose records may not have necessarily followed them.

Davis and Rimm (2004) recommend an individual intelligence test as a first assessment instrument; however as Moltzen (2004) observes IQ testing is not common practice in New Zealand. Horsley (2004) notes in New Zealand problems arise in identifying underachieving gifted and talented students through the lack of tangible data, however the method Baum et al's (1995) research findings outline provide a starting point for investigation into whether a student is a gifted and talented underachiever using tangible and subjective data. Horsley notes instinct alone is not feasible as a means of identification, tangible data such as standardised test scores must be used along with teacher and/or parent observation of specific displayed characteristics to identify students as potentially gifted and talented but underachieving.

Reasons for Underachievement

The causes of gifted and talented students underachieving are often complex and cannot usually be ascribed to one condition (Moltzen, 2004). There are many reasons that a cycle of underachievement may begin and these generally fall under four broad categories: internal factors; home environment and/or parents; school; and peer influence (Clark, 2008; Heacox, 1991; Horsley, 2004; Moltzen, 2004; Montgomery, 2009). However, as Moltzen notes it is important that these factors are not viewed discretely as it is often the way these factors interrelate which can provide solutions to reversing underachievement. Also it is

important to note that the way the various aspects interrelate will vary from student to student and each student's circumstances must be looked at individually.

Clemons (2008) developed a social cognitive model of underachievement and suggests socio-economic status, organisational skills, achievement motivation and parental style and involvement as being the main reasons contributing to underachievement (in order of importance). These reasons all fit into the four groups identified by Clark (2008), Heacox (1991), Horsley (2004), Moltzen (2004) and Montgomery (2009); however it is important to remember these reasons will not necessarily be the cause of underachievement for all students.

Internal Factors

There are four main internal factors that can lead to underachievement (Clark, 2008; Moltzen, 2004; Montgomery, 2009). These are personality traits, lack of motivation, special education needs and English as a second language. As detailed in Table 1, there are personality traits such as perfectionism that mean that some students are more vulnerable to underachievement as their self-esteem is more easily lowered (Montgomery, 2009). Clark (2008) cites two other personality factors, as well as perfectionism, as possible causes of underachievement to be gifted students' super-sensitivity and deficiency in social skills. Although Clark believes external factors may be equally at fault in creating this problem as society's need to isolate those who are different may intensify the problems of sensitivity and perfectionism in the gifted learner. Another cause of underachievement related to personality may be related to gifted and talented students varied and numerous interests (Clark). They may have extended themselves in too many areas and got involved in too many extracurricular activities to apply themselves appropriately to classroom pursuits.

Lack of motivation to do well or to learn is another internal factor that can have external causes. The cause of a lack of motivation usually lies in the content, presentation or possibilities of the material presented in the curriculum. As Montgomery (2009) notes, in a classroom setting it is the teacher who is the prime source of motivation for students, therefore providing interplay between the internal and external factors. They must provide

interest, enthusiasm, positive feedback and feed forward. Most importantly for gifted and talented learners however, they must provide learning material that is at an appropriate level for the student. As Reis identified (2007) a significant reason for gifted and talented students underachieving is the lack of motivation they have to complete boring assignments of routine tasks that they mastered long ago. They are unmotivated by a constant mismatch between the content and their ability.

Special education needs and English as a second language are two internal factors which hopefully the teacher will be aware of as a possible reason for underachievement. There is a large range of special education needs which may lead to the underachievement of a gifted and talented student, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and social emotional and behavioural difficulties being the most common (Montgomery, 2009).

Students for whom English is a second language may underachieve as they have not been identified as being gifted and talented due to the language barrier and may not be able to perform to their potential due to this language barrier.

External Factors

School, home and peers are the powerful external influences on the underachievement of gifted and talented students. As Heacox (1991) notes student success relies on the student themselves (as discussed above) as well as teachers and parents. Teachers and parents provide the appropriate learning environment, support systems and modelling of achievement that students need to succeed (Heacox). When these provisions are not met adequately, underachievement can begin to occur.

One of main external reason for underachievement among gifted and talented students that much of the literature (Davis & Rimm, 2004; Horsley, 2004; Moltzen, 2004; Reis, 2007) points to is the inappropriate curriculum and content that many students have to endure on a daily basis. Students become discouraged by the constant mismatch between their ability and the curriculum and so cease to put effort into their schoolwork. As Reis (2007, p. 125) notes, “high ability students spend hundreds of hours each month in

classrooms where they rarely encounter new or challenging curriculum.” As Moltzen (2005) outlines, curriculum and approaches to learning that may satisfy most other students often are frustrating to the gifted and talented.

Rimm (2003) and Reis (2007) describe four external factors that may occur in schools which promote underachievement among gifted and talented students as being:

- School environments that do not value academic attainment or promote preparation for higher levels of education, but set high priorities on sporting or social pursuits.
- Anti-intelligence atmospheres that consider gifted and talented programmes elitist and emphasise the importance of all students fitting in.
- Rigid classroom environments that value conformity and encourage all students to study the same materials at similar rates or in similar styles and do not encourage imagination or creativity.
- Teachers who fail to see the quality of children’s work because of different values, personal power struggles, or cultural prejudice, or may be satisfied with mediocrity.

Therefore there are three aspects of educational conditions that have to be in harmony with gifted and talented education practices in order for achievement to be obtained: the school environment and policy, classroom atmosphere and culture and the teacher’s beliefs, values and knowledge of gifted and talented education.

However, as Clark (2008) and Moltzen (2004) describe it is common that the causes of underachievement begin at home and/or in the interaction between students and their parents. “For some gifted and talented students achieving at school means conforming to a set of values that are different to those of their own and often their parents.” (Moltzen, 2004, p. 382). Clark notes that the families of achievers often differ to those of underachievers in many ways, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Common characteristics of families of achieving gifted and talented students compared to underachievers

Families of achieving gifted and talented	Families of underachieving gifted and talented
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are interested in their children. • Fathers are important life influences. • Mothers are responsible and independent. • Parents have high educational aspirations for their children. • Parents are well educated. • Families are small. • Children are often the first born or only child. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are dependent on mothers. • Fathers are rejecting and domineering and give little warmth or affection. • Relationships between fathers and children are negative or nonexistent. • Parents set unrealistic goals for their children, children believe they are only as valuable as their accomplishments. • Parents allow achievement to go recognised or rewarded. • Children do not identify with their parents. • Deep social and emotional problems are present in the family. • Parents are not active in their children's schools. • Children's achievements present a threat to parents. • Parents do not share ideas, affection, trust or approval. • Parents are restrictive and severe in their punishment.

(Clark, 2008, p. 373)

Underachievement can also be due to a student not having the resources at home to perform to their potential at school (Reis, 2007). If a student is coming to school without breakfast or lunch, has not had a good night sleep or is too busy outside school hours, they may be unable to reach their potential due to these factors.

Peers are another external factor that can influence a gifted and talented student to underachieve. As Davis and Rimm (2004) note the attitude of peers toward achievement can have a dramatic impact. If the student is in an environment that does not value academic excellence they may hide their giftedness in order to appear 'normal'.

Environments where competition between peers is encouraged can also be damaging to students, as Horsley (2004) points out, competition in classrooms can result in undermining relationships and derision in groups of students. The gifted and talented student's need to protect their ego and a fear of failure can lead to underachievement. Heacox (1991) notes that many gifted underachievers are ruled by what their peers think of them.

There are numerous causes of underachievement among gifted and talented students and often it is a combination of several reasons that lead to a student not achieving to their potential. In order to reverse this crisis and employ the appropriate strategies, the teacher must first have identified the reasons for the student's

underachievement. Only once they are aware of the causes can suitable strategies be engaged.

Strategies for Reversing Underachievement

Successful approaches towards reversing underachievement among gifted and talented students tend to be student-centred, emphasise student strengths and value students' interests (Baum et al, 1995). As Clark (2008) notes, underachievement is a learned behaviour and can be prevented or unlearned, however the strategies for reversing underachievement must be dependent on the reasons for the underachievement.

The first step in reversing underachievement is of course recognising that the student is potentially gifted and talented, in some cases the behaviour may have been reinforced over a long period of time and the glimmer of giftedness may be deeply hidden. The reasons the student is not achieving need to be established and the strategies employed should aim to remove these causes, as Moltzen (2005) notes counselling is an important part of the process as is assisting the gifted and talented student to understand their giftedness and talent and reasons for underachieving. Rimm (2003) and Moltzen (2005) agree that the treatment of underachievement needs to involve collaboration between the school, the student and their family.

Reis (2007) reports while the causes and reasons behind underachievement have been the focus of considerable attention, studies on effective strategies to overcome the problem are few. Strategies for dealing with the reasons that underachievement occurred in the first instance will be discussed here, as well as two of the most frequently cited models for the reversal of underachievement among gifted and talented students.

Internal Factors

To address the internal factors relating to underachievement students need to undergo a change in how they think about learning, it is impossible to change a child's personality traits but as Heacox (1991) notes, for students to be motivated to learn they need to believe that learning is important. Clark (2008) explains that students need to be

taught to self-monitor and to use self-instructions to change their thinking to be more persistent and less helpless. Cathcart (2005) lists six ways of generating interest in learning:

1. Drawing on existing interests. Gifted children often have unusual or unexpected interests, build a profile of children's interests.
2. Involving children in active learning. Open-ended questioning, using Blooms Taxonomy and Multiple Intelligence Theory.
3. Offering new or different experiences. Use the community, students get bored listening to the teacher's voice all day, get out in the real world and learn.
4. Giving opportunities for choice. Differentiate content, process and presentation methods.
5. Involving children in taking responsibility. Planning, carrying out and assessing their own learning encourages ownership and motivation.
6. Presenting the familiar in an unexpected way.

Internal factors such as perfectionism can be addressed through counselling as Reis (2007) describes, counselling interventions generally focus on changing personal and family dynamics which contribute to underachievement. The counsellor's aim should be to "help the student decide whether success is a desirable goal, and, if so, to help reverse counterproductive habits and cognitions" (Reis, 2007, p. 134).

External Factors

In order to reduce the cause of underachievement by external factors schools, teachers and parents need to examine the way gifted and talented students are catered for. Montgomery (2009) notes that in order for gifted and talented students to achieve highly they need a curriculum which: provides additional breadth and depth of coverage; speeds up coverage tailored to individual needs; modifies material to take account of needs and interests; and develops critical and creative thinking, problem solving, interpersonal communication and social skills (some of the Key Competencies in the New Zealand Curriculum).

Gifted students who are placed in regular classrooms may not be receiving education that is at an appropriate level for them and addressing this may begin to reverse the underachievement (Clark, 2008). As Heacox (1991) notes a student who has been caught in the cycle of failure often cannot see a way out and breaking this cycle of failure by focussing on one area at a time can begin to rebuild the student's self-esteem. In order for teachers to reverse the underachievement cycle they need to plan opportunities for success and get the students involved in their own learning (Clark; Heacox). Open, accepting, student-centred and intellectually challenging environments need to be established and underachievers need to be shown the connections between schoolwork and the outside world (Reis, 2007).

Parents also need to be involved in reversing underachievement and Clark (2008) outlines that they need to ensure the home environment is intellectually stimulating. Parents need to have a mutually respectful relationship with their children and model behaviour that they desire. They also need to show interest in their child's schooling and encourage effective time management skills. Rules and demands made by parents need to be reasonable and parents need to display affection, trust and approval.

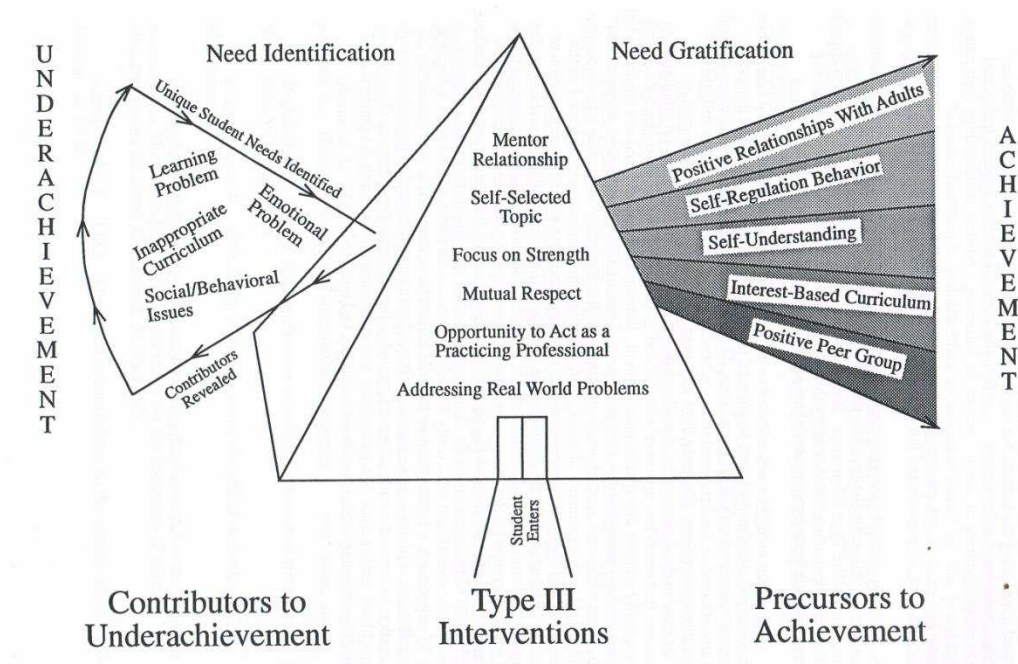
Models of Underachievement Reversal

The Prism Metaphor

Baum et al (1995) carried out research and developed the Prism Metaphor model using Renzulli's Enrichment Triad Model, specifically Type III enrichment, as a systematic intervention for reversing the pattern of underachievement. Type III enrichment provides opportunities for students to investigate real problems in areas that interest them through means of inquiry learning and to present their findings to real audiences (Baum et al, 1995). Through their research Baum et al found that Type III enrichment encouraged the sample group to make positive gains in achievement, attitude and behaviour. Their results led them to suggest a prism metaphor to address the complex dynamics of reversing underachievement. The model uses the prism to redirect the focus from the traditional steps to achievement to using Type III enrichment to unleash the potential of

underachieving gifted and talented students. Baum et al believe the Type III experience uses positive interaction between student abilities, interests, learning styles and supportive student-teacher relationships to transform underachievement into achievement.

Figure 1. The prism metaphor for reversing underachievement



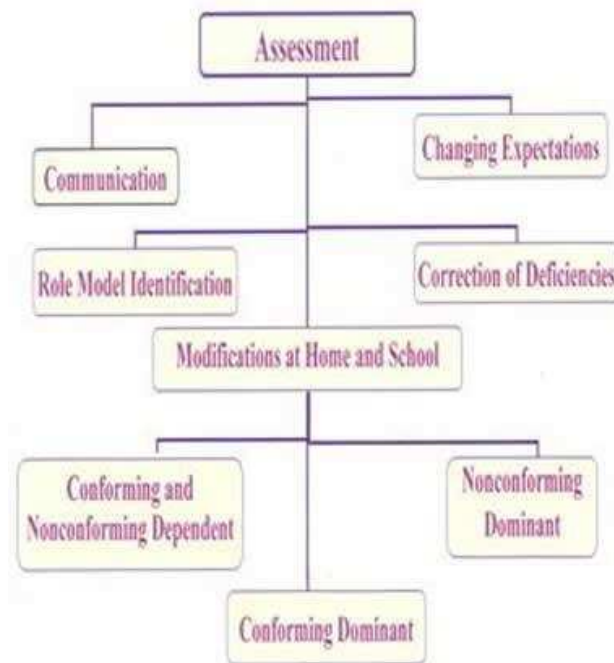
(Baum et al, 1995, p. 35)

As displayed above, the model focuses on identifying the reasons for underachievement, intervening using Type III enrichment which proved through Baum et al's (1995) research to lead to eventual achievement by students previously identified as underachieving gifted and talented students.

TRIFOCAL Model

Another model which has proved to be successful in breaking the underachievement cycle is Rimm's (1986) TRIFOCAL model. The model involves the collaboration of school and family in the implementation of six steps as demonstrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. TRIFOCAL model for curing underachievement syndrome



(Rimm, 2008, p. 160)

Moltzen (2004) describes the principles and practices used in this model as being similar to those employed in the development of Individual Education Plans (IEPs), which are used in special education in New Zealand. The TRIFOCAL model involves assessing the student's capabilities, strengths, interests and areas of weakness, and the extent and direction of the student's underachievement, Rimm (2008) notes that as wide a range of sources as possible should be used to determine in the assessment. Ongoing communication between the school and parents is an important component in the reversal of underachievement, it is possible to reverse underachievement without parent support, but it is a lot easier with their support (Rimm, 2008). In developing this open communication, it is important that no blame is placed on the teacher, the parents or the student, rather it is recognised that there is a problem, and solutions need to be sought.

Rimm (2008) describes that the way the last four aspects of the model are implemented must come directly from findings of the initial assessment. Parent, teacher, sibling, peer and self-expectations of the student's performance may need to be modified; Rimm notes that it is important that others demonstrate a belief in the student's ability to meet these revised expectations. Moltzen (2004) points out that the significance of role model identification to achievement is well established, for this relationship to be successful careful selection is required. The fifth step is addressing skill deficiencies which may have arisen through the underachievement cycle, Rimm points out that this needs to take place through goal-directed tutoring with an agreed upon aim and a specified duration. The last step in this model is to modify the factors that have been reinforcing existing underachievement and establish suitable reinforcement for achieving behaviour (Rimm). The ideal is for students to discover the intrinsic rewards in learning. As Moltzen notes, for some this can be a long process, but for others it may just take a change to a stimulating learning environment, compatible with their learning style, and where opportunities are given to develop their interests and abilities.

Conclusion

Underachievement among gifted and talented students is a great loss both to the student and society; it is a learned behaviour and therefore can be unlearned. However, it is a complex phenomenon in which many factors both internal and external interact to form varying patterns of underachievement. Teachers who suspect underachievement need to employ a combination of standardised assessments and observation of the common characteristics to diagnose underachievement among the gifted and talented. Discovering the reasons for a student's underachievement is necessary in order to go about breaking the cycle of underachievement. Baum et al's (1995) Prism Metaphor and Rimm's (1986) TRIFOCAL model provide two processes which have been proven to reverse underachievement. Breaking the cycle of underachievement takes persistence, patience and time and the collaboration of the teacher, parents and student, but seeing a student achieving highly and enjoying learning is a rewarding part of being a teacher.

Appendix One:

Profiles of Gifted and Talented Underachievers

Adapted from Heacox (1991), Moltzen (2004) and Rimm (2008)

The Rebel

“This is dumb.”

- Does not see the relevance of school activities and assignments.
- “I don’t need to be here” attitude.
- May see school learning as unimportant for success in their chosen field.

The Conformist

“If I do too well, I’ll get teased.”

- Thinks that doing well at school is not worth the effort.
- May have realised early on that finishing work quickly means more work.
- Some students do less than their best because of peer pressure.

The Stressed Learner

“I could have done better if I had more time.”

- Perfectionist.
- May stop trying to achieve out of fear of making a mistake or not getting a high enough grade.
- Procrastinate because they do not believe in their ability.

The Struggling Student

“I used to be smart.”

- May have been an able student who slid through primary school without learning anything new.
- Never had to learn how to learn, may perceive their lack of success as a loss of intelligence.

The Victim

“No one ever taught me how to do that.”

- Blames others for their lack of success at school.
- Uses every excuse in the book about why they have not done the work.

The Distracted Learner

“I had swimming lessons last night.”

- Has personal problems or concerns that affect their school performance.
- May be too busy with extracurricular activities to put in effort required at school.

The Bored Student

“I learned all this last year.”

- May have entered school with advanced skills and abilities and wait years for the curriculum to catch up with their learning needs.
- Other student may say they are bored when they are actually afraid of failure.
- Or may be struggling, and use boredom as rationale for their lack of success.

The Complacent Learner

“I’m doing as well as I want to be.”

- Seems content with how their learning is progressing.
- May not seem to have any academic problems, but others may believe the student could do better.

The Single-Sided Achiever

“This subject isn’t important to me.”

- Believes only certain classes are worthy of their attention and effort.
- May be only willing to work in subjects that are interesting to them.

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